

Studying Ethnic Culture: The Local Community as a Resource

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Multiculturalism has begun to affect the American educational system, causing curriculum changes across the nation. Business courses are analyzing the Japanese economy as well as Wall Street; we hear the call for increased foreign language study; and in music, classes are increasingly devoted to ethnic studies. Most new textbooks give us this international perspective. However, it is often the hands-on learning that gives students the greatest satisfaction and is the most memorable. How can students experience a foreign music culture firsthand?

Class trips and exchange programs provide this type of opportunity. Some well-endowed colleges and universities have the means to import exotic musical instruments and to hire foreign musicians on their faculties, but in this time of budget constraints, such programs are not viable options for most of us. Yet, even with a shoe-string budget, it is possible to expose students to a multicultural musical environment. A much more immediate avenue for the study of ethnic music, and one which can be accessed easily and inexpensively, is your local community.

When I joined the faculty at North Adams State College in Massachusetts, I designed my introductory World Music class as an opportunity to familiarize myself and my students with the ethnic make-up of the town and to uncover any active folk culture. We discovered that although the total population of North Adams was only approximately 16,000, representatives from at least 20 different nationalities settled here. Most importantly, the people of North Adams were happy and eager to share their cultural backgrounds with us. Students learned firsthand about *pysanka*, decorated Ukrainian Easter eggs; *zbojnicki*, a Polish men's dance; *fado*, a Portuguese love song; and *bocce*, an Italian bowling game. We also found a number of talented amateur musicians, many of whom were willing

to perform on campus. The college community at large has had the extraordinary opportunity to hear everything from a Lebanese *oud* player to a Scottish bagpiper.

This local community proved to be fertile ground for multicultural study, and yet North Adams is not unique in this respect. Many cities and towns in the U.S. are made up of people of several nationalities who have retained their native customs and traditions, including music and dance. Finding and utilizing them in your music courses need not be a monumental task. To demonstrate this point, I would like to describe the procedure I developed and offer a few classroom assignments and practical suggestions that you can implement into your curriculum. Although the following outline is devised with college classes in mind, it can easily be revised for use in a high school or middle school setting.

Throughout the semester, the entire class met on a regular basis in order to develop various skills through short assignments, in preparation for a final field project in the community. For this project, students were asked to interview a first-generation North Adams immigrant of their own choosing. The interviews were to concentrate on folk rituals and ethnic music, and the students would submit their findings in written form along with an audio or video tape of the interview.

Preparing for Fieldwork

1) Ethnic Make-up of Town

Materials: Town map

Assignment: List as many different ethnic groups as possible that live in your town and the areas in which they are concentrated. Record sources of information separately.

Objective: College students infrequently venture off campus, and high school students are often unfamiliar with parts of town other than their own district. Here, students can familiarize themselves with street names, districts, and the town's cultural composition. The question of segregation versus integration of ethnic groups over time in a city can also be explored.

Resources: A visit to city hall for a census or city directory, a talk with town elders, a local librarian, the local historical

society, and a telephone book are the best resources for this kind of information.

2) Transcription Class

Material: Tape recorders and pre-recorded tapes for each group of 3-4 students.

Assignment: Listen to the tape and visually diagram pitch and rhythm using original symbols.

Objective: Through repeated listenings, students will distinguish between high and low pitches and possibly rhythmic and melodic patterns. They may also differentiate between the introduction, body, and coda of the composition. A detailed key explaining their original notation and an analysis of the piece should accompany each group's transcription.

Resources: Choose a short piece (under one minute) of purely instrumental music, preferably of one or two uncommon ethnic instruments. One possibility is "A Hukwe Song with Musical Bow" from Southwest Africa. A recording of this piece is a supplement to the journal *Ethnomusicology* 8 (1964). From my experience, students produce their best work for this assignment when they are given a time limit of approximately one hour.

3) Movement

Materials: Dance records and a basic knowledge of a few ethnic dances. Folkways Record Album No. FD6501 "Dances of the World's Peoples" includes a how-to supplement.

Assignment: Follow the leader.

Objective: Acquainting students with what ethnomusicologists believe is a universal aspect of culture. All ethnic groups have some movement with musical accompaniment.

Resources: Line dances are probably the simplest to learn and the easiest to execute with a large group.

4) Secondary Resources

- Materials: Stanley Sadie, ed. *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 6th ed., 20 vols. London: Macmillan Publishers, Ltd., 1980.
- Assignment: Evaluate the *New Grove* as a resource for the study of folk, classical, and popular music. Compare length of articles, degree of detail, inclusion of bibliography, discography, pictures.
- Objective: To have students become familiar with the singlemost comprehensive collection of information on music available.

5) Interview Questions

- Materials: none
- Assignment: Make a list of questions to ask your interviewee regarding his or her family background, immigration experience, folk traditions, musical experience, etc.
- Objective: To be used as a guide during the actual interview.

6) Potluck Ethnic Dinner (Gastronomic Adventure)

- Materials: Cookbooks
- Assignment: Cook or bake an ethnic dish.
- Objective: Recreating and then sampling foods of various tastes and flavors will provide students with direct links to many folk traditions in a fun and relaxed atmosphere.
- Resources: Reserve the school cafeteria in advance and supply paper goods and soft drinks. As an added incentive, have a contest for tastiest dish.

Field Project

Finding someone to interview is the initial step in the fieldwork project. Ethnic restauranteurs are some of the most accessible people.

Clergy are another good resource since they usually have knowledge about the backgrounds of the people in their congregations and can introduce the student to them. Ethnic social clubs or fraternal organizations, such as the Sons of Italy or the Polish Eagles, offer another avenue.

The student should prepare for the interview by reading a pertinent article in the *New Grove Dictionary* or a scholarly journal. Meanwhile, a time and place for the interview may be scheduled. The subject's home is the ideal location, specifically the kitchen. Here, the subject is usually relaxed and the interview can be conducted relatively free of time constraints. The student must be sure to bring along a list of questions to refer to, as well as a pad of paper, a tape recorder, and a few blank tapes. Care should be taken so that the microphone is strategically placed to effectively pick up the voice of the subject. Obtaining clear recordings of the interviewee is paramount; the student can later reconstruct interview questions if they are inaudible.

Using the list as a guide, the student should ask as many open ended questions as possible, for example: Where did your family come from? Where did you grow up? What kind of music were you exposed to as a child? Especially useful are questions beginning with *what* and *how*. Such questions encourage the interviewee to speak expansively about his or her cultural experiences.

In summary, incorporating the local community into your curriculum is an effective way to expose students to a variety of cultures. This can be done easily and at no expense. One needs only to venture out of the classroom and into town.

Suggested Textbook

Worlds of Music: An Introduction to the Music of the World's Peoples. Jeff Todd Titon (general editor), James T. Koetting, David P. McAllester, David B. Reck, Mark Slobin. New York: Schirmer Books, 1984. 2 accompanying cassettes. (The five authors concentrate on cultures that they have studied firsthand. Recorded examples enhance the text. The book includes an exemplary introductory chapter as well as a concluding one on field work.)

Suggested Videos

A Life of Song: A Portrait of Ruth Rubin. 38 minutes, color. 1986. The Cinema Guild, 1697 Broadway, New York, New York 10019. (A very informative portrait of eighty-year-old Ruth Rubin, one of the leading collectors of Yiddish folk songs in the world. This documentary not only introduces

students to Yiddish music, but also shows how one goes about collecting and preserving folk culture.)

In the Good Old-Fashioned Way. 29 minutes, color. 1973. Appalshop Films, Box 743, 306 Madison Street, Whitesburg, Kentucky 41858. (White southern music and rituals of the Old Regular Baptist Church, an American heritage which has remained virtually the same for generations.)

Music of India. 22 minutes, color. 1987. Educational Filmstrips & Video, 1456 19th Street, Huntsville, Texas 77340. (A simple and direct look at a variety of musical instruments through identification, demonstration, and performance.)

Say Amen, Somebody. 100 minutes, color. 1983. Pacific Arts Video Records, Pacific Arts Building, Carmel, California 93923. (A highly entertaining and lively documentary depicting both the spiritual and social lives of the performers of Gospel music.)